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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experiences of the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Twinning Project, an international twinning database developed and maintained by the IFLA Programme for Universal Availability of Publications, which acts as a kind of "dating agency" aiming to match partner libraries as closely as possible, based on the benefits they are seeking from the partnership and the benefits they can offer to the partner. The first section provides background on the project, including areas covered by the questionnaire used to collect information from participating libraries, obstacles in identifying suitable matches, and difficulties experienced by the libraries pursuing twinning arrangements. The second section summarizes recent initiatives, including reorganization of the database, promotional leaflets, use of IFLANET to advertise libraries, participation in the ALA (American Library Association) conference, a proposed article for "American Libraries," and cooperation with the Sister Libraries project. The third section describes: routine database maintenance and procedures followed for each of the library questionnaires received; feedback from participating libraries; and alternative ways for libraries to fulfill their objectives, e.g., exchange of ideas of library practice, interlibrary loans, exchange of catalog records, increasing cultural awareness, donation of library materials, and exchange of staff. (MES)

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Is there a need for a library twinning focal point? The IFLA twinning project and beyond

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Paper

I have posed the question as to whether there is a need for a focal point to which libraries can turn when seeking a twinning partner. In this paper I am going to relate the experiences of the IFLA Twinning Project, but for those who are not familiar with the project I will start by telling you how the project evolved.

Background

The IFLA Twinning Project is an international twinning database which has been developed and maintained by the IFLA Programme for Universal Availability of Publications (UAP), thanks mainly to generous funding from the Unesco PGI Programme. The system acts as a kind of dating agency aiming to match libraries as closely as possible, based on the benefits they are seeking from the partnership and the benefits they can offer to the partner. Although work in the area of library twinning has been carried out by several other organisations, the IFLA UAP Office is the first established focal point to which all libraries can turn when seeking twinning partners.

From the outset the Office only aimed to identify potential partners and 'introduce' them to each other. From that point, the libraries concerned would be responsible for the establishment of the twinning arrangement. Unfortunately, IFLA does not have the resources available to help with any financial aspect of the arrangement such as funding for exchange visits or the mailing costs of exchanging material.

Since the database was initially set up in October 1996, a large number of different

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types of libraries have expressed an interest in the concept of twinning. Each of these libraries has been sent a questionnaire to provide the Office with sufficient information about the library to try and identify a partner who will fulfil their requirements. Apart from full contact details, other areas covered by the questionnaire include:

Statistical data

- Type of library ie national, academic, public etc
- Size of collections, both monographs and serials
- Number of staff employed by the library, both professional and support staff
- Source of financial support available, if any

Objectives of the library in seeking a twinning arrangement

- General areas of co-operation sought such as increasing cultural awareness, exchanging ideas on general library practice, interlibrary loans and exchange of publications, duplicate materials or catalogue records
- Specific benefits sought which, in addition to the general areas of co-operation, may include development of literacy programmes and attainment of expertise in areas such as information technology and preservation
- Specific benefits offered in similar areas

Details of library sought

- Similar type, public, academic etc
- From a specific geographical region
- From a technologically developed or less developed country
- Library holding similar subject material

A high percentage of the questionnaires were returned from a host of different countries and the information was entered on the database but, from the outset, a certain amount of difficulty was encountered in trying to identify suitable partnerships. The major obstacle in initially identifying a suitable match was the diversity of the libraries on the database both in type and geographical location. It was difficult to find similar types of libraries who were from the geographical region requested by the individual libraries.

Additionally, many of the questionnaires were completed by public libraries from less developed countries that were seeking partners in technologically developed countries to act as kind of foster parents. Unfortunately, no reciprocal applications were received from technologically developed countries that were prepared to form a relationship on this basis, which is understandable, as the foremost idea of forming any twinning partnership is that the arrangement should be mutually beneficial. As you will see from the chart a large percentage of the completed questionnaires came from African countries. Most of these were requests from public libraries. Although the chart indicates that a large number of questionnaires were completed by European libraries, only three of these are public libraries.

Of these three, one is a library in Russia which carries out the function of both public and scientific library but preferred not to be twinned with a less developed country. Consequently, we attempted to find a library which held similar material and was from a technologically developed country. Between the end of 1996 and early 1999 we offered them three partners, an institute of technology in the United States, a university library in the UK and a technical library in Hungary. Despite every attempt being made by the Russian library to establish contact with each of these libraries they have still failed to set up a partnership with one of them. The UK library wrote to

say that due to changes in staff organisation they were not currently in a position to devote the necessary resource. We have received no feedback from either of the other two despite sending regular follow-up letters.

Another of the three European public libraries is a county library in Ireland which we did match with an African regional library in Tanzania. This partnership seemed to be progressing well with correspondence continuing between the two librarians. Some literature was sent from Ireland and the Tanzanian librarian promised to prepare a Memorandum of Agreement. However, I then received a letter from Ireland from which it appears that the Tanzanian library is not in a position to pursue a twinning initiative at this time, although the Irish librarian is still very interested in twinning should another suitable partner be identified. He also said that he feels that Tanzania would probably see more benefits in twinning with a larger and better resourced library service.

Further progress

From an administration point of view the Office was becoming increasingly short of resources to continue with the development of the database and, in February 1998, the Director of the Programme applied to UNESCO for further funding. A sum of $3,000 was generously promised and work was able to continue. Since that time several initiatives have been taken to try and overcome the difficulties previously encountered.

Re-organisation of the database
I, as administrator of the database, attended a course on the use of Access, which was the software programme already used. With the increased knowledge acquired from this course I reorganised the database in an attempt to simplify the identification of suitable partners. However, this did not seem to alleviate any of the problems that we had already encountered.

Promotional leaflets French and Spanish versions of the promotional leaflet have been produced and widely distributed at conferences and workshops. These leaflets, together with the English version, have been put on INFLANET, the WWW home page of IFLA. (Website address: http://www.ifla.org/VI/2/p4/proj4.htm).

IFLANET
Libraries who have been on the database for some considerable time and for whom a suitable partner has still not been found are 'advertised' on IFLANET. A short summary of the needs of each library has also been included. Links have been made from each version of the promotional leaflet to this list.

ALA Conference
A poster session was held at the ALA conference in 1998. Posters demonstrating the aims and development of the project were displayed and a number of cards advertising the needs of each of the libraries for which partners have not been found were also made available. The session attracted a huge amount of interest by participants from all over the world and most of the cards were taken. Many participants left business cards and further information was subsequently sent to them.

American Libraries
Following the conference, at the suggestion of the President of the ALA, an abstract was submitted to American Libraries with a view to writing an article promoting the project to as wide as possible an audience.

Sister Libraries
A meeting was arranged with Joan Challinor of NCLIS to discuss methods used by

them in successfully implementing Sister Libraries, a similar project. We had already corresponded with Beth Bingham during their period of setting up the project. This project has been successful but it was facilitated by the cities already being part of an existing twinning arrangement. Also, the initiating libraries are all situated in the host country of the project. However, several ideas were exchanged and the meeting proved to be very useful.

Sister Libraries 2
A second phase of Sister Libraries was initiated by the ALA and Michael Dowling, Director of the International Relations Office, sent out a message on IFLA-L asking for libraries interested in forming a relationship. A list of unmatched libraries from the twinning database was sent to him.

Routine maintenance
For each of the questionnaires received the following procedures are followed:

- Enter contact details on the database
- Check whether any library already on the database meets the criteria and if not:
- Send letter explaining that further contact will be made as soon as a suitable partner is identified
- If a suitable partner has not been found after four months send a further explanatory letter
- If, after a further six months, a partner has still not been found enter on IFLANET and send letter to say that no further action will be taken unless a partner is identified.
- If there is a library already on the database which meets the criteria:
- Send letters to each library giving contact details of the other together with some guidelines on establishing a twinning partnership. The details of the libraries are switched to a different database
- After four months write to each library asking for developments in the partnership
- If no reply received to first letter a further letter sent after six months
- If still no reply, no further action taken.

If one library decides not to proceed with twinning the other library is re-entered on the original database.

If one or both libraries decide not to proceed with that particular partnership but would prefer different partners both libraries are re-entered on the original database.

Despite these positive steps the project has still met with limited success. The diversity of the libraries remains a major problem. Although the majority of libraries are public or academic (which include universities, schools and youth centres), there are other types such as national, scientific, parliamentary, library for the blind, auction house, and ecology centre. This diversity, coupled with different geographical regions, has resulted in finding a library to match exactly the requirements of the other library being almost impossible. However, several partnerships have been identified where the areas of interest have been similar and the libraries introduced to each other.

Unfortunately, despite regular follow-up letters, feedback from these 'twinnings' has been poor and it is uncertain whether any have met with total success. From the replies that have been received several have decided that they do not wish to continue with the partnership and have not always given any reason for this decision. Amongst the reasons that have been given are:

- Geographical distance too great

- The identified partner not considered suitable
- Unable to get a reply from the partner

In two cases the partnership has arrived at the stage of drawing up a memorandum of agreement and then one of the partners has withdrawn. In only one case has the feedback continued to be positive with reports of exchange of material and a possible student visit. We are aware that there are some existing twinning arrangements, which have proved to be successful, but these have not been initiated by this project. If a library itself initiates a partnership it could be that more resources are available and also the librarian may be more enthusiastic in establishing and developing the relationship.

In a further attempt to find partners it was decided to use an individual approach to actively seek out libraries to match the criteria of those on the database. For example, to find a partner for a national library of a small country, the national library of a similar sized country and one which it was felt already had some allegiance, was approached. The reply was "The Library is currently in the middle of a strategic planning process and is not in a position to consider such a suggestion until reorganisation has been completed. In the event of the Library considering such a suggestion, we would probably want to consider a library which is geographically closer." Another approach did meet with a little more success when the Dutch Library Association was approached to help with a request from a library seeking a Dutch-speaking partner. The Librarian kindly placed an announcement in their professional magazine and a reply was received from a Dutch library. The two libraries were introduced but no feedback has been received.

We did receive some helpful feedback from a library service in Jamaica for whom we had suggested a regional library in Tanzania as a suitable twinning partner. Despite several attempts to contact this library the Jamaican library had not met with any success and we also failed to get any response to several follow-up letters. The Director of the library service in Jamaica felt that her efforts had brought into sharp focus the difficulties that inhibit the concept of a twinning arrangement and listed her observations as follows:

"The most important needs in twinning are:

1. Staff exchange/training
2. Assistance with collections development including donation of material
3. Transfer of programmes

In the first two very necessary areas, funding is the key factor and, regrettably, there is a death of funds, usually on both sides, to support such products. Invariably, twinning in these areas exists on a donor/recipient basis which predicates an imbalance in the fortunes of the partners.

The third area, transfer of programmes, is also best accomplished by exchange of personnel for training and/or donation of equipment. Again, the problem of funds surfaces".

So, once again it would seem that the funding, or lack of it, has been the major obstacle in successfully initiating any sort of agreement. Establishing and maintaining a successful twinning partnership requires an enormous long-term commitment on the part of the librarians of each of the institutions involved. In the present library environment where budgets are strained to the limit and staffing similarly stretched such a commitment becomes yet another drain of these valuable resources.

However, taking aside the funding problem could it be that other factors are currently

affecting the need to enter into any formal partnerships? During the short life of the project overwhelming changes have taken place in libraries, especially due to the impact that modern technology has had on the communication process. 'Talking' to other libraries in all parts of the world has become an everyday occurrence through access to more and more Internet mailing lists. If we take a closer look at the objectives and aims of the libraries originally seeking a twinning arrangement it is clear that at least some of these can now be fulfilled without the need to enter into an individual partnership.

Exchange of ideas on general library practice
Internet mailing lists are now an ideal platform from which libraries can share or exchange ideas.

Interlibrary loans
Initiatives such as the very successful IFLA Voucher Scheme have introduced a quick, cost effective and easy payment system for all interlibrary loan transactions.

Exchange of catalogue records
Much of this information is now readily available on the Internet - not only library catalogues but also published articles and information in general which libraries may find useful.

Whilst technology has not had the same impact on the following aims there are other reasons why, when it actually comes to developing the relationship, one or both of the libraries may have second thoughts.

Increasing cultural awareness
Whilst the difference in culture can be an enlightening experience it can also create obstacles or barriers in developing a successful partnership

Donation of publications and other library materials
This area is generally more beneficial to partners from less developed countries and tends to acquire the status of a gift programme rather than a mutually beneficial twinning arrangement.

And finally

Exchange of staff
This is the one area which does largely depend on funding being available, possibly from outside sources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is disappointing that the project has not met with more success despite the database having been widely promoted and every effort made to follow up the progress of suggested partnerships. It is apparent from the interest shown that there is a place in the library world for twinning partnerships but it is debatable whether there is a need for an international focal point. Most libraries have definite ideas of the type and geographical location of potential partners and it may be more fruitful for them to initiate their own search. Modern technology, such as the Internet and mailing lists, is an ideal place to advertise the requirements of the initiating library and although not available to everyone at the present, it is becoming increasingly so. Hence the question "Is there a need for a library twinning focal point?"

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